DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 250 FL 800 402

AUTHOR Smith, Jennifer J.
TITLE Closed-Caption Television and Adult Students of English as a Second Language.
PUB DATE 28 Apr 90
NOTE 22p.; Appendices are not included in the document.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; Cultural Context; Curriculum Development; *Educational Television; *English (Second Language); Humor; *Language Skills; Oral Language; *Second Language Instruction; Student Centered Curriculum; Vocabulary Development
IDENTIFIERS *Closed Captioned Television; Reading Rainbow; Virginia (Arlington)

ABSTRACT

The use of closed-caption television (CCTV) to help teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults was studied with a group of adult students in the Arlington, Virginia, Education and Employment Program. Although CCTV is designed for the hearing impaired, its combination of written with spoken English in the visual context of television makes its possibilities for ESL intriguing. Consideration must be given, however, to programs with appropriate content, appropriate length, and verbatim or quasi-verbatim captioning. Experimentation was done with "Sesame Street," a soap opera, a courtroom drama, and an episode of PBS's "Reading Rainbow" called "Ludlow Laughs." The latter was the most successful due to its use of adult emotions, simple language, verbatim captioning, slow narration, overall length, lack of copyright restrictions, and inclusion of other segments about comedy and laughter. Among the findings are the following: students repeated phrases of the text while watching and anticipated the spoken text on third and fourth viewings; students used new and unusual vocabulary from the program in follow-up discussions and written exercises; and students with advanced speaking and listening abilities show the best ability to use CCTV. Contains 5 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Salter
Jennifer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED339250

CLOSED-CAPTION TELEVISION AND ADULT STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Jennifer J. Smith
Action Research
Final Project
George Mason University
April 28, 1990

FL800402

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I. THE EMERGING QUESTION

I began my action research with a simple question: How can I use closed-captioned television programming to help teach English as a second language to adults? Closed-captioned television (CCTV) is television programming with the audio text written across the bottom of the TV screen. It is called "closed" captioning because the text is coded so that it does not appear on the screen without the aid of a special device, called a closed-caption decoder. Television programs are closed-captioned for the benefit of the hearing impaired. A wide variety of public and commercial television programming is closed-captioned, including sitcoms, advertisements, news, dramas, documentaries and movies.

Although CCTV is designed for the hearing impaired, its combination of written with spoken English in the visually compelling environment of television struck me as rich with possibilities for adult ESL students. I teach in the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP), which serves adults who are learning English as a second language. Our students come from all over the world. They range in age from late teens to 65 or older. As first languages they speak Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Korean, Amharic, Farsi, Arabic, French, Russian, and Hindi (among others). Some are recent immigrants or newly arrived refugees; some have lived in the United States for many years. Some students received little or no education in their own countries. Other students are college-educated with professional careers. Most work full-time and have families to care for. They are an

astonishingly diverse group of learners with a wide variety of special needs.

Until February 1990 I taught an intensive evening class that met for two and one-half hours, four evenings a week. I also teach in the Adult Learning Center of REEP, which is a computer-aided, drop-in learning lab. The Adult Learning Center (the ALC) has a closed caption decoder, a television, and a VCR. The ALC director asked me to figure out how to use the equipment for teaching students in the ALC and in the classroom.

My initial questions were:

(1) What kind of CCTV programming is available, and what sorts of programs would work best with ESL adults;

(2) What levels and types of students can handle it;

(3) Which students will benefit most from CCTV lessons;

and, (4) Exactly how can CCTV be used to teach, i.e.,

- -- What length of program should I use?
- -- How should I present it?
- -- What sorts of oral or written excercises should accompany the lessons?

In particular, I wondered whether my beginning evening class would understand enough of any television program to benefit from CCTV lessons. Even with the aid of written text, I couldn't imagine their understanding anything as fast-paced as television. I also wondered whether CCTV would be most effective with students who spoke and understood well but had trouble reading and writing, or with students who spoke and understood very little but had well-developed literacy skills. What strategies would the students use

when confronted with this novel medium? Would they read or listen? Would the written text distract or help? What effect would repeated viewings have? Would students be pleased or put off to find television in the classroom? How many of them watched English television at home?

Despite all my questions and reservations, I was excited to investigate the use of CCTV with my students. I knew that they responded well to songs, games, and skits, and had accepted these less conventional approaches to learning English. I imagined they might be delighted to discover television as a learning tool. I wanted to introduce them to a central source of American culture, especially since the television set might be the only English speaker in their homes. If they could learn to use this pervasive medium in their struggle to acculturate, they would have a powerful tool in hand.

II. RESEARCH

I began my research by reading a book called Watch Your Language [1]), which enthusiastically advocates the use of CCTV with ESL students. The book also provides a partial listing of available CCTV programs and suggests techniques for using it in the classroom. I interviewed George Spanos of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. Mr. Spanos had just completed a study

---

[1] Parlato, S.J. (1986). Watch your Language -- In Captions. Presentation at annual conference of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Anaheim CA.

evaluating the benefits of CCTV for teaching ESL students in the Prince George's County, Maryland schools. The study investigated the use of CCTV with ESL elementary students. Mr. Spanos shared with me the final report on the study (the CAL report ([2])), which outlined teaching procedures and results in great detail. In addition, he suggested some guidelines to follow in finding appropriate CCTV material. I also had access to some information published by the National Captioning Institute in Falls Church, Virginia, which I have included in Appendix A.

I began my search for CCTV programs by pouring through various television guides: WNVT File 53, 1989-90 ([3]), an instructional television programming guide which lists programs available for taping and reuse during the school year; listings of the programs on the Arlington public access Channel 33; and a number of weekly TV Guides, which list all locally available public, commercial, cable, and pay TV.

One roadblock I encountered immediately was the restriction on use of copyrighted material. Although Congress has provided for non-profit educational institutions to tape and use programs on open broadcast (public and commercial TV, but not cable or pay-per-view TV), there are severe restrictions on that use ([4]). A teacher must use the taped material within ten school days, may only show it to

---

[2] Evaluating the Benefits of Closed-Captioned TV Programming as Instructional Material for ESL Students, Submitted to the National Captioning Institute by The Center for Applied Linguistics in Cooperation with Pr·nce George's County, MD Schools, July 7, 1989.

[3] File 53, published by WNVT/Channel 53, Central Virginia Educational Telecommunications Corp., Commonwealth of Virginia, 1989.

[4]. See text of Copyright Guidelines, Appendix B.

her students once (with one repeat for reinforcement), may not edit the program, and must erase the tape after forty-five days.

Since I wanted to be able to build up lesson plans and exercises around each program for repeated use by all teachers, both in classrooms and in the ALC, these restrictions presented a considerable barrier. Thus, although I have experimented with commercial programs in the ALC, I have mostly confined myself to using instructional programming that can be kept, used, and reused as any teacher desires for the entire school year (in the present case, until August, 1990).

Guided by recommendations from George Spanos and the CAL report, and based on my own intuitions about what might work, I looked for programs with: (1) appropriate content -- not too childish, complicated, idiomatic, strange, boring, sexual, or violent; (2) appropriate length -- self-contained segments less than fifteen minutes long; and (3) verbatim or quasi-verbatim captioning. Captions are designed for the hearing impaired, who will not be bothered by a discrepancy between what they hear and what they read. Often the captions summarize or paraphrase what is said. For ESL students, however, hearing one thing and reading another might do more harm than good.

The restriction on length became necessary when I realized how much language is contained in even two minutes of television. As it turned out, it was easy to construct two one-hour lesson plans for beginning students around a five-minute segment of CCTV. Only fairly advanced students were able to understand a half-hour program.

III. USING CCTV

I began using CCTV in the ALC where I was doing most of my taping and reviewing, and where there was always a ready supply of students to use as guinea pigs. Actually, the students came to me as soon as thay saw the television on and noticed the words on the screen. Most students said they watched English television programs at home, even if they didn't understand much of what went on. Students thought that the captions would help them understand more, and many requested information about how to obtain a decoder of their own. I know of two students who actually bought decoders for home use.

These impromptu sessions in the ALC taught me that students generally needed at least two viewings to understand the outlines of a program, that students with low speaking and listening skills had a hard time understanding anything at all, and that most students had a hard time keeping up with the captioning until they understood the story very well. On the other hand, students generally paid rapt attention to the screen and worked very hard to decipher the language. They were delighted when they did understand, and very responsive to the funny or sad or surprising parts of the program. Discussions broke out among the students as they asked each other questions and shared what they had understood.

One noteworthy reaction, obviously due to the captions, was that students spontaneously wrote down the unknown words they saw on the screen. Without the captions, they would not have been able to spell the words, and might not have been able to pick them out of

the stream of speech. They simply would have failed to understand, without any way to put their fingers on the problematic word or phrase. With the captions, they were able to pick out the new word, write it down, and ask about it afterwards. Watching the video again reinforced the meaning, pronunciation, and spelling of the new word.

Students often repeated phrases of the text over and over to themselves while watching. On third or fourth viewing, students seemed to be paying far more attention to the captions. For example, they would anticipate the spoken text by saying the phrase aloud as soon as they saw it on the screen, before it was spoken on the tape.

Students used new and unusual vocabulary from the program in follow-up discussions and written exercises, words like "grumbling" and "routine", that they would not have known nor felt comfortable using before the lesson. I've never seen students pick up new vocabulary so quickly or use it with such assurance as they did from the CCTV programs. Maybe seeing and hearing the words used repeatedly in the context of a coherent story made them seem more real, like words they could actually use. It occurred to me that television is about as close to a simulation of real-life English speaking as I could provide in the classroom, closer than rehearsed dialogues or role plays, closer than listening to the teacher read a story. They could "eavesdrop" on English conversation, watch the speakers, understand the context, see the words as they heard them, and have the experience repeated as often as they liked.

Because of my experimentation in the Learning Center, I was able to settle on an excellent piece of video for use in the classroom. Before I decided on it, I went through many less successful programs. I began by showing students bits from Sesame Street, which is what the Prince George's County study used. Although they're wonderful in some ways -- short, simple concepts, cleverly presented -- I ended up thinking that they were mostly too juvenile for use with adults.

I ruled out most commercial television as too idiomatic and culture-bound. It seemed to me that most of the language, jokes, and situations on popular evening sitcoms would require endless explaining in order to become comprehensible to adults from very different cultures. I was also wary of showing anything violent or overtly sexual to people who might find watching such things in a mixed classroom upsetting or embarrassing. In addition, it was difficult to find short, self-contained segments, since most shows only make sense in the context of the entire half-hour show. On the other hand, since most students report watching English television anyway, perhaps I was too critical of the shows I considered and too pessimistic about the students' ability to make sense of them. If I find a way around the copyright problem, I will reconsider the sitcoms and dramas on commercial television.

I experimented with two commercial shows that seemed promising: (1) "The Judge", a half-hour courtroom drama; and (2) "Loving", which is a daily soap opera. I chose "Loving" because many students told me that they liked and watched soap operas, both in their languages and in English, and because the dialogue is generally very

simple and to the point (e.g., "Where are you going?" "I have to see Trucker!" "But Egypt, he's not your husband anymore. He's married to Jill." "I know, but I must tell him about our unborn child!" ([5])). Unfortunately, the situations these characters find themselves in are often outlandish and unsavory, various assortments of characters end up in bed together in almost every episode, and the plots are convoluted and drawn out over months and years. Short, self-explanatory segments from these programs could be used, however, and the captioning is quasi-verbatim.

I had better luck with "The Judge". Each episode tells the story of a case in family court -- for example, a child custody battle -- and, except for the legal terminology, the language is simple. The situations and characters are usually easily comprehensible -- the heartbroken mother, the remorseful teenaged parent, the rebellious adolescent, the scheming step-father, etc. -- and some interesting family and social issues are broached. Of course, the wise judge resolves each case in a half-hour. "The Judge" worked well for students advanced enough to digest a long program. Sometimes I stopped the tape before the verdict and asked them to predict the ending, sometimes we just discussed the characters, their feelings, and the issues at stake. Especially in a multi-cultural group of students, the discussions were interesting and lively. Because of the length of the program, however, I was not usually able to show it more than once, and only the most advanced students were able to follow the story.

---

[5]. I made up this dialogue, but I did not invent the names or the situation.

The program that I finally settled on, which I and other teachers used extensively and around which I built several lesson plans, is an episode of PBS's "Reading Rainbow" called "Ludlow Laughs", based on an award-winning book by Jon Agee. "Reading Rainbow" is a children's series that features one book each show. LeVar Burton hosts the program, introducing the book and providing follow-up commentary and related skits and film-clips. Phyllis Diller narrates "Ludlow Laughs", accompanied by animated illustrations from the book.

"Ludlow Laughs" was successful for the following reasons:

1. Unlike most children's shows, the story was about adults and adult emotions. Ludlow is a bad-tempered man who works in a Complaints Department. He never smiles. One night he goes to bed and has the funniest dream in the world. His laughter is highly contagious, and soon, by means of radio, Ludlow has the whole world laughing with him through the night. However, every morning he wakes up his grumpy self again. This situation continues for months, until one night Ludlow sleeps quietly. When he wakes up, he is a changed man, able to smile and laugh while awake.

Although the plot is simple, the story is enigmatic and emotionally charged. Why is Ludlow so ill-tempered? Where does the funny dream come from and what does it mean? Why is Ludlow's laughter so affecting? How does he manage finally to bring out the happy self buried inside? These are puzzling adult issues that the story does not resolve.

2. The language is fairly simple. Although the story includes some sophisticated vocabulary, it presents it in simple sentence

structures and an understandable context. Thus the students are likely to learn some new and unusual words in a memorable context.

3. The captioning of the story is verbatim.

4. Because the story is meant to be read to children, the narration is slow, allowing my adult students to read the captioning as the words are spoken.

5. The book itself is presented in less than five minutes.

6. The producers of "Reading Rainbow" have given express permission to non-profit schools to record and use the show for the entire school year.

7. Along with the story itself, the "Ludlow Laughs" episode includes various other segments about comedy and laughter -- film clips of classic comedians like Chaplin, Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy, examples of people laughing contagiously in different "styles" of laughter (e.g., snorts, giggles, and guffaws), blooper out-takes from other "Reading Rainbow" episodes, a documentary piece about a stand-up comic, and a skit with LeVar Burton and a clown. All of these provided good instructional material that the students enjoyed and that complemented the story. For example, I had an intermediate class discuss what made them laugh, and then write about what they found funny in the classic comedy clips.

Some of the lesson materials I created to use with "Ludlow" are collected in Appendix C. My classroom technique evolved into the following scenario. First, if the class had never used CCTV before, I explained how it differed from regular television. I mentioned that decoders were available for them to buy for home use. I suggested that reading the captions might help them understand the

audio portion of the program and would allow them to recognize and learn the spelling of new words.

Then I handed out a list of some of the important words they would encounter in the program. We discussed the meaning of the words and practiced pronouncing them. Then I showed the story, including LeVar's short introduction. After the first showing I asked questions to elicit the outlines of the plot (e.g., "What is Ludlow like at the beginning of the story?", "What happens when he goes to sleep?", "What happens when he wakes up?", and "What is Ludlow like at the end of the story?"). Usually, at this point in the lesson, some students have good answers, while others are confused. After the students recount and discuss the story, I show it again. At this point students are starting to repeat the text aloud, and to anticipate the spoken text by reading aloud what they see on the screen. Students jot down words they don't understand.

Next I hand out a cloze exercise using one-to-three-sentence-long segments of the text. We read them aloud, with students filling in the missing words from memory when they can. Then I show the tape again, and the students attempt to complete the cloze exercise. After the third showing, the students read their completed cloze sentences to each other, amid much discussion and peer correction. I usually finish the lesson by showing additional segments of the tape just for the students' entertainment.

Instead of the cloze exercise, or in addition to it if I have time, I assign a writing assignment based on the "Four Questions" that I used to elicit the outlines of the story after the first viewing (see above). If I have the chance, I show the tape again

several days later for reinforcement, and then do another writing exercise based on the non-story segments of the program.

When I was first working with "Ludlow" in the ALC, I gave students the Four Questions to answer after several viewings of the story. I used the exercise to test their comprehension of the story. Appendix D contains a collection of these responses to the Four Questions. I was amazed at how much vocabulary they picked up from the story and used in their writing. Keep in mind that these students were not given the vocabulary list or cloze exercise that I used in the classroom. They had simply watched the captioned story two or three times, sometimes spontaneously writing down new words and asking me about meaning afterwards.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

As must be clear from my descriptions, I think CCTV has great potential for teaching ESL adults. It links spoken with written language in the context of "real" situations. The captioning helps turn the seductive medium of television into a literacy and language teaching tool. It helps introduce newcomers to an important conveyor of culture and information.

As also should be clear from what I've said, CCTV has some severe limitations. There seems to be a shortage of suitable programming for ESL adults, especially because of copyright restrictions. Captioning is not usually verbatim. Learners need a fairly high level of listening and reading ability to take advantage of CCTV.

I have not found an answer to my initial question concerning who might benefit most from CCTV, low literacy students with good listening skills, or highly literate beginning students. However, the two groups do respond differently to CCTV. Highly literate beginning students tended to make long lists of new words and pull out dictionaries. They needed more viewings to comprehend the outlines of the story. On the other hand, they were most likely to anticipate the audio text by reading the captions, and they incorporated more of the verbatim vocabulary into their oral and written retellings of the story. Students with advanced listening ability and low literacy skills understood the story more quickly, but retold the story using fewer of the new words and more of their own vocabulary. However, they tended to notice words that thet had understood before but had not known how to read or spell.

Students with advanced speaking and listening abilities, whether highly literate or not, showed the best ability to use CCTV. Because they understood the overall story so readily, they were able to learn the new vocabulary without reinforcement or prompting by the teacher. The advanced students also showed the best integration of old and new vocabulary; they were able to intersperse new words with their own phrases, instead of using long phrases verbatim from the story.

V. FUTURE RESEARCH

I will continue working with CCTV, both using what I've found and searching for new materials and uses. I will continue to tape,

review, and field test various programs. In particular, I'm intrigued by the possibility of using the many closed-captioned advertisements available on commercial television. Ads are short, pithy, and full of interesting information and images. Most of them are aimed at adults. In addition, they are usually captioned verbatim.

Another possibility is the nightly weather report, which would be of practical use and tap into something adult students already know about. If a teacher showed it to her class every evening, they would soon become familiar with the vocabulary. The copyright restrictions would not pose much of an obstacle; because a teacher would only want to show current forecasts, there would be no reason to show tapes repeatedly or keep them on hand. However, because it's live television, the captioning is not likely to be as good -- i.e., not quasi-verbatim and probably full of typographical errors.

In order to fully exploit CCTV, I need to find out how difficult or impossible it would be to get permission to use advertisements and other commercial television. Considering that teachers would be introducing a whole new population to their programs and products, it's possible to imagine that the owners of the copyrights might not be adverse to giving permission for instructional use.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

-------- (1989). Evaluating the Benefits of Closed-Captioned TV Programming as Instructional Material for ESL Students. Submitted to the National Captioning Institute by the Center for Applied Linguistics, in cooperation with the Prince George's County Schools.

-------- (1989). File 53. Commonwealth of Virginia. Central Virginia Educational Telecommunications Corporation.

Goldman, Milton and Sandra Goldman (1988). Close-Captioned TV. Journal of Reading, Vol. 11, No. 5.

Parlato, S.J. (1986). Watch Your Language -- In Captions. Presentation at the annual conference of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Anaheim, CA.

Stover, Nancy G. (1989). Innovation in Educational Television. Media and Methods, Sept./Oct.

APPENDIX A

INFORMATION FROM THE NATIONAL CAPTIONING INSTITUTE

APPENDIX B

COPYRIGHT GUIDELINES

APPENDIX C

LESSON MATERIALS

APPENDIX D

THE FOUR QUESTIONS